



The commanding officers of the Coast Guard cutters stationed at Portsmouth Naval Shipyard are, from left, Cmdrs. Graham Stow of the Reliance, Matt von Ruden of the Campbell and Anne Ewalt of the Tahoma.

Photo by [Rich Beauchesne](#)

Trio in rare home-port visit for Christmas

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PORTSMOUTH NAVAL SHIPYARD - They may be homeported at the shipyard, but for about 200 days this year, members of three Coast Guard cutters have been off at sea, patrolling the coast, conducting homeland-security missions, thwarting the transportation of drugs and helping to enforce immigration policies.

For the first time in months, all three cutters are tied up at the shipyard and will stay in port through Christmas.

On Monday, the cutters' three commanding officers convened aboard the Cutter Tahoma to discuss their experiences at sea and in port.

It's a 24-hour, seven-days-a-week job that is rewarding, tiring, and at times "pulls at your heart strings."

That's how Reliance's commander, Graham Stowe, described the role the Coast Guard plays when patrolling the Caribbean during an immigration and customs-enforcement patrol.

Tahoma's commander, Anne Ewalt, shared a story about an experience at sea when crew members spotted would-be immigrants "sitting on a tube, 50 miles off shore with their feet in the water."

The Coast Guard's job in that situation, she said, is to pluck the immigrants from their rafts, help restore their health, and prevent them from entering the country illegally.

"You ask them where they are going, and they tell you, 'anywhere but Haiti'," Stowe said. "It's a real humanitarian issue."

Crew members, whose average age is about 26, undergo extensive training sessions before conducting these types of searches, the officers said. They also watch videos that explain why immigration and custom enforcement is so important.

Campbell's commanding officer, Mat von Ruden, said the Coast Guard's patrols have deterred illegal immigrants from even leaving their own shores, because the Coast Guard's presence makes them aware that they will either not survive the trip or be sent back home.

All three officers agreed that often their immigration and customs enforcement patrol turns into a search-and-rescue mission.

That mission is only one of many the Coast Guard conducts.

Another, which they all deemed extremely important, is their enforcement of the nation's fishing regulations.

According to von Ruden, more than 90 percent of the fishing industry is in compliance.

"We're keeping honest people honest," Ewalt said. "Either they don't know the regulations, or they bought a net from someone who told them it was a different size ... There's a million reasons. The bottom line is that they're trying to make a living fishing and we want their kids and grandkids to be able to continue that tradition."

The cutters are doing more than measuring the size of nets during fishing patrols, they also inspect the boat's safety equipment.

With the required safety equipment, a boat could sink and fishermen could survive until a vessel can rescue them.

"Safety can make all the difference," von Ruden said while telling a story about a boat they boarded where a serious leak in the vessel was imminent.

Members of the Campbell sent the ship home for repair.

"There's a chance we saved lives," he said.

The Coast Guard is a rewarding job, they said, but all agree, it's nice to be home.

All three say they've been stationed all around the country, but there's a certain connection they feel to Portsmouth.

"It was our first choice," Stowe said for himself and his family